

## Section One

# Marxist Cultural Theory

### Critiquing the Dominant

Just as the major intellectual task Marx set himself was to explain how capitalism, the dominant economic and social form, worked, so the major task of Marxist cultural theory is to analyze the dominant cultural entities work. The dominant media modes such as Hollywood cinema, popular music, and commercial network television need to be understood because they are what most people experience as media culture most of the time. Ways in which they are being transformed by new and emerging technologies, new patterns of corporate control and ownership, and changing state policies and priorities need to be understood. How they provide entertainment--leisure pleasures--and how they contribute to the social environment must be grasped if effective strategies for transformation of existing entities or the construction of radical alternatives is to be accomplished.

Such a task goes beyond describing the economic system of art and media production or constructing a Marxist aesthetics out of the few and scattered writings of Marx and Engels on art. It involves developing an ability to discuss art and society at the same time, not accepting the division of intellectual labor into academic disciplines or specialties. It means going beyond the usually unexamined premises of existing art analyses.

This section begins the process of thinking of media and society at the same time, of understanding the relation of art and politics, of culture and history, and of all the permutations of those terms.

Describes some of the interacting structures of dominant structures implicitly a critique of Flusser's ISA's model

- this whole section looks very promising  
- interested - write it soon. There is a problem with "Marxist" becoming an over generalized term esp. in PTSM & new culture

## The Sociology of Art/Media/Culture

The Marxist analysis of media rests on/starts with the assumption that it is necessary to account for art not simply as a unique individual experience but in that experience's social dimension. Marxism inherently implies a social dimension for analysis.

But the terms and basic concepts of Marxist analysis today are not self evident. In the socialist world vast upheavals are challenging past orthodoxies. And in the capitalist core the relative success of Marxist thought in cultural analysis has produced an often vague and watered down use of basic concepts which frustrates further conceptual development as well as a productive debate with non-Marxists. This contemporary fluidity in discussion demands increased precision in definition.

Therefore, this chapter examines basic concepts of Marxist cultural analysis.

An adequate Marxist cultural analysis must be dialectical, materialist, historical, political, international, and comparative.

**dialectics**

**history**

**materialism**

**politics**

**international, comparative**

*to be greatly  
expanded*

## critique of Kantian aesthetics

The dominant tradition in Western aesthetics derives from fundamental positions established by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant in the *Critique of Judgement* (1790), at the time of the French revolution and the beginning of the capitalist era. Kant put forward concepts such as the imagination as a powerful creative force of human consciousness, the non-utility of art, and the singular uniqueness of "the aesthetic." Aesthetic knowledge for Kant is distinctly different from and separate from other areas of experience and knowing. He holds that artistic judgements have a subjective universality.

Combined with the concept of organic unity, that is that the form and content, style and meaning, of a work must be understood as bound together, not as separable parts (this is a stand against the tradition of rhetorical criticism which dominated western thought on art, particularly verbal art, from the classical period onward--after Aristotle) Kant's concepts formed a bold challenge to the previously dominant analysis of art. Organic unity was also the basis for evaluation. Going against the concepts of decorum and strict "rules" of beauty, organic unity provided the basis for accepting and validating a much wider range of creative work than had been accepted by the academies and neoclassic thought. Thus Shakespeare could be found a genius, medieval (gothic) art could be found worthy and inspiring. So within its own context of an aesthetic doctrine suitable for a revolutionary period of bourgeois ascendance to power, and the overthrowing of a feudal past, Kantian aesthetics were progressive.

The best known contemporary versions of this aesthetic stand fast with the idea that art objects must be understood within themselves, in their own terms, or sometimes within the historical evolution of that particular medium. The art work is viewed in isolation from its creation or reception, separated from history. add Wimsatt/Greenberg

go on to discussion of de Stael

add at end of this section:

Russian formalism, Mukarovsky  
semiotics, Eco,

Bourdieu, 2

Chuck Kleinhans

Some aspects of his work

--the French context

--sociological

--a critique of the dominant Western aesthetic tradition in the capitalist epoch, that is the philosophical position of Kant and the defense of the high art tradition.

Bourdieu's general importance in thinking about mass culture is that he offers a social analysis which gives a fuller understanding of taste publics, and how class and other factors operate to shape cultural activity, including consumption.

The biggest drawback to Bourdieu's analysis is that he doesn't use a data base with much television viewing or ownership. In some ways, the development of a tv culture in the US may have qualitatively changed the situation, culturally and socially.

Basic ideas

--aesthetic experience must be understood in terms of its social context.

--we must understand all cultural objects, not just high culture ones, in examining cultural and aesthetic life.

--there are various lifestyles which people use in cultural experience [elaborate here, the relation of lifestyle, subculture, consumption culture, class, race, and ethnic culture.]

--intellectuals tend to separate art, culture, from everyday experience, for them it is an intellectual experience. [bodily culture: cuisine, the domestic environment tends to be women's responsibility within the family division of labor.] Sports and exercise represent the other side of this: turned into a leisure industry, bodily experience separated from the everyday. Or brought back into it through an activity called health.

Psychotherapy as another form of this separation of emotion and mind and body?

--working class rejection of bourgeois standards of domestic environment, makeup, etc. [to what extent is this generational? compare Hebdidge on style in youth subcultures.]

How are lifestyles produced under capitalism?

How does tv shape lifestyle and consumption style?  
Does the concept of tv demographics help us understand different audiences?

Can you predict an audience or an audience response from examining the program form and content itself?  
Is fast food related to class lifestyles?

This all looks very interesting -  
especially about a tv culture.  
This relates to an idea in the  
Preface & later in ref. to Johnson -  
The qualitative change in consciousness  
today. You may want to look at  
emphasise that point early on  
& shape material around it.  
Elayne Reppin on non-fiction  
TV is a good source for  
reference



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a revised and expanded version  
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## **Popular Third World Cinema**

### **Part One**

**Basic Theoretical Issues: the need for a thoroughly dialectical  
analysis of popular commercial culture.**

While collaborating in teaching and, more recently, writing about  
Third World media, we realized that the issue of popular commercial

media was central to our developing concerns.<sup>1</sup> Here we lay out some of the basic issues that left thinkers must deal with in thinking about mass produced and mass consumed culture in the developing world. Conceptually, we are trying to understand contemporary mass culture in the full complexity of its economics, organization, and institutionalization as well as its actual experience and interaction with people's lives. For a full understanding of the political and social ramifications of mass culture and communications, we need to understand how this happens in the advanced industrial capitalist nations, the advanced industrial socialist nations, and the immensely varied postcolonial nations moving to liberation. This discussion should be seen as an episode in a longterm, evolving collaborative project.

The typical model for analyzing Third World mass culture used by both Third World and First World intellectuals begins from the assumption that such products are debased, inferior, and corrupting. When imported from the capitalist core countries, mass culture provides another example of cultural imperialism and ideological indoctrination. When produced locally, it fails to match the Hollywood standard of production and appears ridiculous in comparison. In a survey article, "New Directions in Indian Cinema," Chidananda Das Gupta writes of the

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<sup>1</sup>Chuck Kleinhans and Manji Pendakur, "Learning Together: Synthesizing Economic and Cultural Analysis in the Marxist Study of Third World Film and Video," *JUMP CUT* no. 33 (March 1988), 82-90

hardened arteries of the mass cinema's social conscience, such as it may have been. The hedonism is complete, and reckless. A third of all the Hindi films of 1978 dealt with the themes of crime and revenge and bear the unmistakable impress of James Bond, complete with electronic gadgetry, nubile females, and high kicks at the villain's chin in slow motion. Traditional values are still adhered to, but the nod at religion is more perfunctory. Sex and violence count for much, and but for a strict censorship, would be rampant. In a word, [sic] the mass cinema is more escapist than ever before.<sup>1</sup>

This stance is very much like the position put forward by the Frankfurt School critics, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, in their critique of the modern capitalist culture industry. And it is open to the same problems that have been evident in their model of a cultural apparatus dedicated to indoctrination and submission.<sup>2</sup>

rewrite in clearer narrative form:

In North America, the need to construct a global and totalizing left theory of communications in order to confront the dominant paradigm offered by mainstream bourgeois intellectuals has lead left communications scholars such as Herbert Schiller and Dallas Smythe to a simplified position. While they and others clearly describe the

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<sup>1</sup>Das Gupta

<sup>2</sup>For a fuller discussion of left cultural analysis: Chuck Kleinhans, "Marxism, Moralism, and Mass Culture," *Jump Cut* no. 3- (forthcoming).

overall pattern of domination between dominant and dependent, overdeveloped and underdeveloped, core and periphery, and between capitalist and consumer, add--strongest in analysis of info, little concept of art or entertainment--they have not accounted for variations in reception, for the ways that people can oppose or negotiate dominant or intended meanings and effects in communication processes.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the totalizing model leaves no room for resistance. The culture industries' imperatives are assumed to be not only dominant but also invincible.

In the third world, this kind of critique is fairly common . cite titles(fn.)

Coming from a different perspective, a number of different analysts share the condemnation of Hollywood or commercial Third World films while arguing for an oppositional or alternative cinema.  
examples

move the following elsewhere thus when Clyde Taylor accepts the judgement that "the film industries of [India], Hong Kong, Mexico and Egypt are widely perceived as *schlock* factories," producing "sometimes lavish and usually pandering nationalisations (internalisations) of the Hollywood entertainment ethos."<sup>2</sup> it is all together too simplistic/reductionist an analysis. Taylor, and many others such as Gabriel, Gerima, who support "Third Cinema" (a goal we share) simply dismiss or condemn commercial entertainment cinema--Hollywood

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<sup>1</sup>Cite works, Guback, etc.

<sup>2</sup>Taylor, Third World Affairs

and tw regional studios-- in their promotion of Third Cinema. However, this is a mistake.

actually the situation is more complex, for there are inconsistencies and variations among all these thinkers, and they themselves would probably actually shift the theoretical terrain if asked to deal with Oscar Michaux, Ossie Davis, Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, Spike Lee, Bill Cosby, Robert Townsend etc.

film has been an especially important area for practical and theoretical development

however, it is often discussed without reference to other forms of communication and culture, incl mass communication in tw countries. We believe that the actual context, the state of literacy, availability of radio, tv, newspapers, books, magazines, records and music, etc. must be taken into account.

as well as the political situation {this is the conclusion--that policy questions under socialism, development/change, capitalism/imperialism are the place where aesthetics and political economy converge}.

there are a number of understandable reasons why tw intellectuals (using the term broadly to cover those who use their knowledge and cognitive abilities/skills as the main basis for their work) tend to reject mass culture:

- a. they have been educated into or born with high culture
- b. the process of intellectual growth and individuation often includes the need to reject part of what one grew up with (this is not inherently bad--it is how people also come to a greater political consciousness as they reject the racism or class prejudice of their childhood environment)
- c. it can also involve the acceptance of foreign models of art, intellectual discourse, etc.
- d. intellectuals tend to have as friends other intellectuals: the writer/critic/academic is likely to know aspiring filmmakers, etc. There is an inevitable generational conflict with the established culture and its guardians.
- e. the traditional process of becoming a trained intellectual, particularly an academic humanist separates one from commercial culture.
- f. intellectuals often exhibit a fear of commercial culture, knowing very well that their media skills (writing, directing, performing, etc.) can be turned to the purposes of the dominant commercial culture, and that they will be well paid for working in it. Fear of co-optation.

Such a position is usually accompanied by a preference for the developing world's "Second Cinema;" that is, what is known and shown from the Third World in the international film festivals of the West: a cinema without a popular base but with serious aspirations to art and enlightenment. Directors such as India's S. Ray, ---, fit this

category. [add here that we will develop later the question of India New Wave cinema.]

Sometimes the desire is for "Third Cinema," a more politically militant tradition.<sup>1</sup> quote solanas and gettino

Teshome gabriel dismisses entertainment cinemas in the Third World, but the audience we are trying to reach has been shaped, influenced by this. The kind of analysis that has been developed of Hollywood cinema (historical, authorship, genre, social/cultural history, left political, feminist, has been increasingly sophisticated in terms of both a formal and content level of analysis, in both a communication model and an artistic/aesthetic analysis.

feminist criticism, for example, helps us understand the complexity of the mass culture product when read by an audience that experiences oppression, ranging through various kinds of class and status, but also fundamentally based as many Third World feminists have discussed.<sup>2</sup>

discussion of the domestic melodrama tradition in recent film studies and tv studies.

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<sup>1</sup>The basic reference is Solanas and Getino, "Toward a Third Cinema," available in Bill Nichols, ed., **Movies and Methods**. (Berkeley: U of CA Press, 1976). The concept of Third Cinema has been productively elaborated by Teshome Gabriel in his **Third Cinema in the Third World** (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982). See also, **Third Cinema**, ed. Jim Pines and Paul Willemen (forthcoming British Film Institute publication).

<sup>2</sup>

the degree of complexity on an aesthetic, ideological, and informational level.

[move next two paragraphs to end?]

People familiar with our previous work would immediately understand that we participate in making and teaching "Third Cinema," and encourage its development. And they would also understand that we have a more skeptical but also sympathetic view of the Third World's "Second Cinema." But they might then be surprised to find us arguing for taking commercial entertainment forms seriously. We do so, not to make claims that such films are inherently or automatically politically progressive, but to bring attention to the undeniable fact that such films are widely and warmly received, that they have created their own tradition, their own viewing patterns and expectations, and that understanding mass entertainment cinemas must be an important part of developing an effective socialist film practice that seeks to address the masses of people.--before during, and after a revolution-- as indeed it has been under existing socialisms.

It is also the case that as political divisions increase and sharpen during periods of revolutionary ferment, that members of the petty bourgeois intelligentsia are called on to choose sides. Thus some will move to more radical position. Any large scale political party or organization not hooked into a narrowly nationalist or religiously fundamentalist rejection of mass culture will have to come to terms with commercial culture. We might remember that in the mid and

late 1930s the CP-USA did have a very significant base and presence in Hollywood, in some unions and in some individuals. Whatever critique might have of the actual political organizing that went on, the CP was certainly correct to try to mobilize progressive people in the literary, musical, theatre, visual arts, and entertainment sector.

### An example, a counter example, and several other stories

At the start of his book, *The Empire's Old Clothes: What the Lone Ranger, Babar, and other innocent heroes do to our minds*, Ariel Dorfman tells the story of a poor Chilean shantytown woman who, having heard he was a teacher who criticized industrial popular culture asked him if he really thought people shouldn't read photo novels, the comic book romantic love stories popular throughout Latin America. As Dorfman tells it,

I...answered her. It was true. I thought that photo novels were a hazard to her health and her future.

She did not seem to feel any special need for purification. "Don't do that to us, *companerito*" she said in a familiar, almost tender way. "Don't take my dreams away from me."<sup>1</sup>

This incident took place before Salvador Allende was elected President of Chile in 1970. Dorfman met the same woman after the election.

She came up to me, just like that, and announced that I was right, that she didn't read "trash" anymore. Then she added a phrase which still haunts me. "Now, *campanero*, we are dreaming reality."<sup>1</sup>

Dorfman recognizes that the woman needed to dream, but he also explains his own need to "dissect those dreams." Both of these impulses have to be understood to develop a genuinely dialectical understanding of art and ideology.

Because the critical role of intellectuals like Dorfman makes them sensitive to political, cultural, and social conditions and the indicators of change, they read mass culture symptomatically, and read it, critique it, very well. But they often do not extend their analysis to the actual use of mass culture, its reception and change, its place in the audience's social relations. Thus they tend to see mass culture as an opiate. As Dorfman puts it,

She required those illusions in order to survive. She had to make up somehow for what was missing in her life, and she didn't mind--or care--if she was being manipulated.<sup>2</sup>

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And yet here he is projecting into her mind. How do we know that that was what she thought? After all, the story can be read a different way, as all stories can. Perhaps when she said, "Don't take my dreams away from me," she was actually articulating a well-known left cultural position that mass culture contains a utopian element which can be read by the public, and developed by an artist. Resisting the hegemonic ideology, the utopian hope in commercial mass entertainment points to a desirable, even possible, future social transformation.<sup>1</sup>

Let's tell a different story, this one set in Nicaragua in 1984, as experienced by one of us (Chuck). He noticed that in the Sandinista household where he lived in Managua that after the adults and school age children left the house, the domestic labor was done by two sisters, who took care of the several pre-school age children, did the cleaning, cooking, and laundry in a busy morning, and fed the kids a noonday meal, and then put them down to sleep while they stopped for the first time in a hectic day that began at dawn, and watched the Mexican *telenovelas* (soap operas\*elaborate fn?) on Sandinista tv. Clearly, whatever ideological message was being offered, the tv program was also important for the break that it offered, for the social act of viewing with a sister and co-worker, for the chance to simply relax one's muscles in a familiar chair and watch a familiar program. The message is joined to the massage.

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<sup>1</sup> Such as Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," in Nichols, ed. **Movies and Methods, vol. 2. Jameson**

Mexican historical telenovela, significance of the woman at the center of the narrative. A presence and a voice. etc.

Discuss feminist analysis of soap operas/melodrama. relation to womens work. Cite: Duncan, Seiter, etc. importance of analyzing daytime tv-- Mimi, Julia on Xian tv; Knowing this, you look at things differently.

Dorfman doesn't address this level of production and consumption. But here the material and the ideological connect, precisely at the point of recognizing women's unpaid but socially necessary labor in the home. Or to put it another way, who washed and ironed Dorfman's clothes? And what did *she* think of photo novels and telenovellas? But Dorfman didn't ask her, and that's a problem with his investigation, a way in which it is limited.<sup>1</sup>

What Penelope read while Odyseus was on the road.

Nor does he consider women's emotional labor in the home, a necessary labor for repair and reproduction of the work force. But if we take that labor seriously, then we can see emotional fiction, sentimental drama, and

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<sup>1</sup>We speak from personal experience in learning how to share domestic labor. Ideology is that which is taken for granted, what remains unrecognized. When women's household work, physical and emotional, in unrecognized and simultaneously women's recreation and entertainment is seen as simply corrupt or inconsequential, ideology is in action.

romance stories as the gendered counterpart of the male action adventure, the clinical case study, and the psychological novel/play/film.

And what of Dorfman himself? Didn't he have any trash reading for intellectuals around his place? After all, to critique mass culture one must first know it. And we've noticed that intellectuals are not above indulging in fairly mindless recreational media, [examples? -- professional spectator athletics, detective fiction, Masterpiece Theatre, Monty Python, etc. -- though it is usually marked with more of the signifiers of high culture. In other words, while Dorfman is not operating in bad faith here [well, he is, sort of], he certainly is limited in his conception of leisure, entertainment, recreation, and their relation to production, so the insights he brings to bear on the text is not equalled by observation of the context. To make this argument is not to call for a totally relativist or simply pluralist view of mass culture, but it is to say we need a fuller view of mass culture phenomena. We need to develop a view that recognizes entertainment as a politically valid activity that has to be taken into account when analyzing the information that mass culture communicates. And we have to see how people can appropriate mass culture to their own ends.

Another story from Nicaragua may dramatize the issue. An article in Barricada, the FSLN party newspaper, discussed the *testimonio* (a testimony, a personal story typically of political oppression) of women

who had been prisoners in the dictator Somoza's prisons.<sup>1</sup> The new prisoners were received by the other women with ointment, towels and novellas. The ointment was a salve for healing after torture. The towels were for keeping clean, for health and self-respect. And the novellas (popular paperback novels using a basic romance narrative) were for diversion. The Mexican westerns, which had the least relation to daily life, were given to the women who had been tortured the most. In an extreme situation like this, the use of popular literature for distraction has an obvious political edge. In addition, the novelas provided a way that women could keep diaries or write things down, in between the lines of type and in the margins. They could appropriate the novela (here the object, as well as the text) for their own use.

clearly this is an extreme case, but it emphasises the point that...

Appropriation is one of the concepts we need in understanding the popular reception of mass culture, for people are not simply passive victims in the face of the culture industry. People can and do select from what is available to them. They can read, mis-read, and reread. They can read "against the grain" to find pleasure, their own pleasure, in a media text. Rather than dismissing entertainment cinemas, we have to understand that the audience has been shaped and influenced by the dominant cinemas, and that must be a starting point for any successful alternative artistic practice which hopes to

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<sup>1</sup>"Testimonio de mujeres sandinistas: La Dura trinchera del FSLN en las mazmorras somocistas." *Barricada*, 24 Aug 1984. Egdelina Lanuza discussed the significance of the article with Kleinhans in 84. cite cuban article on testimonio. Victor Casaus, "El genero testimonio y el cine Cubano"

connect to the mass audience. Entertainment film has diverse pleasures and cannot be dismissed for an avant garde or elite practice. Rather, it must be learned from.

In the summer of 1987 Sandinista tv was showing some telenovelas in evening prime time. In the same household mentioned above, some of the men and most of the children would gather to watch them. (The women of the household were usually out attending school or political meetings in the evening.) When asked about this new situation with the men getting engrossed in what had traditionally been thought of as "women's tv," one woman pointed out that wartime inflation had driven the price of rum and beer very high, so men could not afford to go out as much and they had substituted watching tv in the evening, and they were now hooked on the telenovellas. Or as one man in the group put it, "When you can't have your mother, you make do with your mother-in-law."

As is often the case in the developing world, people use their wit and resourcefulness to adjust, tinker with, and adapt that which is externally produced to fit their own purposes. The concept of domination needs to be balanced with the concepts of adaptation and appropriation. The critique of mass culture must proceed along with an understanding of its popular base and its progressive potentials.

## Part Two

### Contradictions in *Coolie*